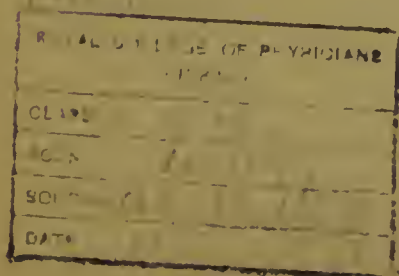


THE GOLD HEADED CANE AND ITS AUTHOR, WILLIAM MACMICHAEL.

By FRANCIS R. PACKARD, M. D.

I have chosen for my theme this evening the life and works of one who was both a physician and a librarian and who has preserved in two books, which his modesty caused him to publish anonymously, the most delightful record of the lives of some of the great English masters of medicine. To these books we are indebted for the perpetuation of some of the choicest stories which have become professional classics and for the preservation of lifelike portraits of some of the great men whose names adorn the medical annals of Great Britain. But for the labor of love of Dr. Macmichael these records would have been totally lost or buried in oblivion in scattered places, inaccessible save to the laborious searcher.

William Macmichael, the author of the Gold Headed Cane, was born at Bridgenorth, in Shropshire, in 1784, and after receiving his education at the grammar school of that town, entered as a student at Christ Church, Oxford, where, after receiving his degree of Master of Arts in 1807, he graduated as a Doctor of Medicine in 1816. In 1811, he was elected to the Radcliffe Travelling Fellowship which owed its foundation to the generosity of Dr. Radcliffe, about whom he writes so delightfully in his chef d'oeuvre. These fellowships were founded with the purpose of giving their holders the opportunity of travelling in foreign lands, and Dr. Macmichael passed several years journeying in Russia, Turkey, Greece and Palestine. That he was an observing and interested traveller is manifested in a little work which he published in London in 1819, entitled "A Journey from Moscow to Constantinople, in the years 1817 and 1818." He was, for a short time, physician to Lord Londonderry while the latter was ambassador to Vienna. He settled in London in the practice of medicine in 1818, and was elected a fellow of the College of Physicians of London in the same year. At the outset of his career as a practicing physician, he had the good fortune to secure the friendship of Sir Henry Hallford, to whom the College was indebted for the gift of the Gold Headed Cane, which had descended to Sir Henry from the distinguished line of bearers about whom Macmichael centered its autobiography. Sir



Henry Halford's influence in professional and social circles in London was immense. His name was really Henry Vaughan. His father was a physician in Leicester, who devoted his entire income to the education of his seven sons, all of whom proved themselves worthy of the parental self-denial by the eminent positions which they subsequently obtained in the professions which they respectively adopted. Sir Henry after graduating from Oxford, secured an advantageous social position for himself by his marriage to the daughter of Lord St. John of Bletsoe. He inherited a large property on the death of Lady Denbigh, the widow of his mother's cousin, Sir Charles Halford, Bart., and by an act of Parliament in 1809, changed his name from Vaughan to Halford. In the subsequent year he was made a baronet. He attended in a professional capacity George III, George IV and Queen Victoria, and after the death of Matthew Baillie, he had the largest and most fashionable practice in London.

Halford was the president of the College of Physicians of London from 1820 until his death in 1844, and it was during his presidency that the College was removed from Warwick Lane to Pall Mall East. Those who envied his position attributed his success to his courtly manners and he was nicknamed "the eel-backed baronet." The story is told how he galloped from the death bed of George IV out to Bushy Park in order that he might have the honor of being the first to inform William IV of the glad event. He was present at the opening of the coffin of Charles I, in 1813 and published an account of the proceedings on that occasion. J. F. Clarke, in his autobiography, accuses him, amongst other things, of retaining possession of part of the fourth cervical vertebra of the king through which the axe passed, and displaying it at his dinner table as an interesting curio.

Halford, in the words of Dr. Munk, "at the height of his success, and when his duties at Court were the most onerous, found it necessary to have in reserve some physician, on whom he could implicitly rely, to act as his representative and substitute when such was needed. His choice fell on Dr. Maemichael, who, through Sir Henry's influence, was appointed in rapid succession Physician Extraordinary to the King in 1829, Librarian to the King in 1830, in place of a very eminent physician, Dr. Gooch, recently deceased; and finally, in 1831, Physician in Ordinary to the King."

Halford had been obliged to resign his position as physician to the Middlesex Hospital owing to the pressure of other duties as early as 1800, but it was probably also due to his influence that twenty-two years later Macmichael was appointed to the same position. Macmichael was very active in the affairs of the College of Physicians,

served among its officers on several occasions, and read a number of communications before it. He wrote various articles on contagion and infection, none of them possessing any great value. In spite of his powerful backing and the important positions he held, Dr. Macmichael lacked the ambition or did not possess the aptitude to acquire a large practice. In 1837, at the age of fifty-seven, Dr. Macmichael suffered an attack of paralysis which obliged him to retire from professional life and he died two years later at his residence in Maida Vale. Sir Thomas Watson, the famous London physician, was one of Dr. Macmichael's friends who knew him many years. In 1878 Sir Thomas Watson wrote of him as follows, to Munk, 1. (Footnote 1, Roll call of the Royal College of Physicians, article on Macmichael) "Dr. Macmichael was fond of society, and qualified alike to enjoy and embellish it. Having travelled long and seen many cities and the manners of many men, he possessed a large stock of general information, was fertile in various and amusing anecdote, and was wont to mix, with a certain natural ease and grace, in lively and interesting discourse, without making his own share in it unduly prominent. His cheerfulness, equanimity of temper, and kindness of heart, endeared him to a large circle of devoted friends, of whom a very few only, at the time of this writing, survive to commemorate his engaging qualities and to regret his loss."

Under Sir Henry Halford's presidency, the College of Physicians underwent a great awakening. It acquired, largely through his individual efforts, a splendid new home and he also originated the evening meetings which were henceforth held in the Hall. These were held once a month during the first six months of the year, at nine o'clock in the evening. Tea and coffee were provided. The meetings were attended not only by physicians but by many persons of prominence in the various walks of life. The papers presented at them were, therefore, as a general rule, adapted to a mixed audience. They were not read by their authors, but by the Registrar of the College, except in the instance of the President, who was permitted to read such communications as he might wish to make himself. A great part of Sir Henry's Halford's success in these innovations was due to the active part taken by Macmichael in seconding his efforts, in this as in every other way by which he could show his gratitude and aid his friend and benefactor. In nothing could he have succeeded better in awakening renewed interest in the venerable College than by directing attention to its past history and to the achievements of the illustrious men who had been connected with it. It was probably this desire which led Macmichael to utilize his erudite

knowledge of the subject in the compilation of the fascinating book to which he gave the name of "The Gold Headed Cane."

The new College was opened on the 25th of June, 1825. According to its veracious autobiography on the previous day, the Cane was deposited in a corner closet of the new building, "with the observation that I was no longer to be carried about." The Gold Headed Cane now occupies a glass case in the Library of the College, where it may have the consolation of feeling that it is gazed on by many visitors who have read its history and been stimulated by it to wish a close view of the author.

The Cane was carried successively by Radcliffe, Mead, Askew, Pitcairn and Baillie, and bears their various arms engraved upon its head. It was presented to Sir Henry Hallford by Dr. Baillie's widow, and he in turn placed it in the College.

Dr. Macmichael's happy inspiration to write its autobiography was carried into effect at the time when the enthusiasm of the Fellows at the acquisition of their splendid new hall was at its height. The first edition was published in 1827, and a second edition in the succeeding year.

The third edition, edited by Dr. William Munk, was published by Longmans, Green & Co., in 1884, forty-five years after Macmichael's death. Dr. Munk was Harveian Librarian of the College of Physicians, and speaking in that capacity for the Cane, he brought the latter's recollections down through the presidency of the College by Dr. Thomas Mayo to the latter's death in 1871. He also added some interesting footnotes to the matter contained in the two previous editions. Munk's continuation is written in very good imitation of the easy narrative style of Macmichael and is a valuable contribution to English medical biography. His edition, however, lacks the quaint illustrations which ornamented the others and added to their charm.

The Cane in ancient days was regarded as an essential part of the equipment of every physician. Dr. Munk in the third edition of the Gold Headed Cane adverts to this fact and also explains the origin of the custom. The cane usually carried by physicians had for its head a knob, of gold, silver or ivory, which was hollow, and perforated so that it served to contain aromatic preparations which could be inhaled as a preventive of contagion. The favorite preparation for this purpose was the "vinegar of the four thieves," or Marseilles Vinegar, an aromatic vinegar which, according to the confession of four thieves who had robbed the plague stricken in Marseilles, had prevented them from contracting the disease while pursuing their nefarious occupation.

The Gold Headed Cane was adorned by a cross bar for a top instead of a knob, a fact which Munk explains by the statement that Radcliffe, its first owner was a rule unto himself, and very possibly preferred a handle of that kind for his cane as a distinction from that used by the majority of physicians.

The Cane begins its autobiography by narrating some of its experiences while carried by John Radcliffe (1650-1714), who was physician to King William III. The account of the physician's visits to his royal patient is told with a delightful verve and there is no reason to doubt the veracity of the portrait drawn of that great but most unattractive personage.

Radcliffe accumulated a fortune of which he left a large portion to Oxford University and much to charity. Shortly before his death, Radcliffe gave the Cane to Richard Mead (1673-1754), who succeeded to most of Radcliffe's practice and occupied his late residence. The account of the adventures of the Cane while in the hands of Mead is one of the best parts of the book. It opens with a description of a consultation between Mead, Sir Hans Sloane and Dr. Cheyne on the case of Bishop Burnet. George Cheyne (1671-1743) was a man of immense bulk, at one time weighing thirty stone, which by observing a diet of milk and vegetables, he succeeded in reducing to less than half that weight. He was very witty and many stories and repartees are attributed to him. Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753) is now chiefly remembered as the founder of the British Museum. ¹ (Footnote 1. In the first edition of the Gold Headed Cane, Macmichael states that Sir Hans Sloane "had shortly before been created a baronet by his Majesty George the First, being the first physician upon whom an hereditary title of honor had been conferred." Dr. Munk in the third edition corrects this statement in a footnote stating that Sir Edward Greaves, M. D., was created a baronet by King Charles the First at Oxford, May 4, 1716.) At his death he desired the nation should benefit by the wonderful collections which he had made, and directed that although they had cost him £50,000 they should be offered to the Government for the sum of £20,000. Parliament voted the necessary funds and thus the British Museum came into existence.

Mead was an erudite scholar and an observing and skillful physician. He wrote a treatise in Latin on smallpox and measles to which he subjoined a translation into the same language of Rhazes' commentary on smallpox. He was a strong advocate of inoculation for smallpox. Lady Mary Wortley Montague had witnessed the beneficial results of inoculation as practiced by the Turks during her residence at Constantinople, and on her return to England in 1722

determined to introduce it to her fellow countrymen. Whilst professional and public opinion was yet weighing its efficiency, Caroline, Princess of Wales, nearly lost one of her children by an attack of smallpox. She was desirous of having her other children inoculated, and obtained from King George the First pardons for six condemned criminals on condition of their submitting to be inoculated. Five of the felons contracted the disease; the sixth who concealed having previously had the smallpox was not infected. At Mead's suggestion, a seventh criminal, a girl of eighteen, was subjected to the experiment by the Chinese method, which consisted of introducing into the nostrils a tent soaked with the matter taken from ripe pustules. The girl contracted the disease and recovered.

The Cane relates an oft repeated story which shows Mead's powers of observation leading to an innovation in practice of permanent value. It was frequently observed that in cases of persons with dropsy, when tapped and the effusion suddenly drawn off, the patient swooned and often died with great suddenness. Mead determined to replace the pressure of the fluid thus suddenly withdrawn by external means and devised the expedient of placing a broad bandage around the abdomen which was gradually tightened as the fluid was removed. The Cane relates that it was frequently present and saw this method used, "more especially in the case of Dame Mary Page, wife of Sir Gregory Page, Bart., who was afflicted with this disease. *** In sixty-seven months she was tapped sixty-six times, and had two hundred and forty gallons of water taken away, without ever once fearing the operation." These details are carefully recorded on a monument to this lady in Bunhill Fields cemetery. In Mead's time political feeling was at fever heat. Although he was an ardent Whig, he numbered the Tories Garth, Arbuthnot and Freind among his intimate associates. When the latter was imprisoned because of his supposed implication in the Atterbury plot for the restoration of the Stuarts, Mead visited him in the Tower, and secured his release in the following remarkable manner. Sir Robert Walpole was taken ill and sent for Mead. The latter availed himself of the occasion to plead Freind's cause. The latter was a member of Parliament and his chief offense seems to have lain in some intemperate speeches. Mead extenuated these, spoke of Freind's public services as a physician to the British army in the Spanish expedition and in Flanders, of his erudition and his scientific attainments, and finally refused to prescribe for the Prime Minister unless he liberated him, which he accordingly did. The evening following there was a great assembly of guests at Mead's house all anxious to

congratulate Freind. As the latter was leaving, Mead drew him aside and presented him with a bag containing all the fees which he had collected from Freind's patients during his imprisonment. 1. (Footnote 1. In the two first editions the amount was stated to have been 5,000 guineas, but Dr. Munk in the third edition points out in a footnote that as Freind was only imprisoned for three months this is hardly credible. He thinks the sum might have been five hundred guineas, increased to five thousand by an error in transcription.) Freind reciprocated Mead's friendship by writing a "History of Physick from the Time of Galen to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century—chiefly with Regard to Practice—In a Discourse written to Dr. Mead."

This work was begun during his imprisonment, and shows much sound learning and original research. Mead used to love to gather his friends at stated periods in his wonderful library. The Cane describes the talk at several of these meetings in a delightful way. Thus at one of them Mead discourses on the careers of Linacre and Caius and Freind displays his learning in a brief review of the great anatomical discoveries of the seventeenth century. The conversation then deals with Harvey and with many of the benefactions by which he manifested his great interest in the College of Physicians. The fortunes and misfortunes of the College are followed most delightfully. The great fire of London destroyed its home and many of its most interesting treasures. Only 112 books were saved of the already large collection which it contained. After the fire of 1666, the College moved to new premises in Warwick Lane where was built the hall which it occupied until 1825. Among the interesting consultations which the Gold Headed Cane heard whilst in the hands of Dr. Mead was that upon Sir Isaac Newton. Cheselden was the surgeon who was in attendance upon Sir Isaac who suffered from a stone in the bladder, and the Cane states that "It was my lot often to be in company with the eminent surgeon whose name I have now mentioned; for the public seemed universally to have adopted the sentiment of the popular poet of the day:

'I'll try what Mead and Cheselden advise.'

Pope.' "

The Cane gives a beautiful account of the great philosopher's closing days; and then relates how Sir Hans Sloane was elected his successor as president of the Royal Society of Great Britain, being the first medical man to be chosen president of that Institution. Mead died in 1754, in his 81st year, and the Gold Headed Cane passed into the hands of Dr. Anthony Askew (1722-1774).

The Cane's new possessor had travelled widely, not only throughout Europe but through the East, and was as ardent a bibliophile as its late owner. As the Cane says, "Our house in Queen Square was crammed full of books. We could dispense with no more. Our passages were full; even our very garrets overflowed; and the wags of the day used to say that the half of the Square itself would have done so, before the book appetite of Dr. Askew would have been satiated." *** "As a collector of books Dr. Askew was the first who brought bibliomania into fashion; and no one exhibited his various treasures better than himself. The eager delight with which he produced his rare editions, his large paper-copies, his glistening gems and covetable tomes, would have raised him high in the estimation of the Roxburgh Club. Some, indeed, were of such great rarity, that he would not suffer them to be touched, but would show them to his visitors through the glass cases of the cabinets of his library, or, standing on a ladder, would himself read aloud different portions of these inestimable volumes."

In the chapter on Askew there is a very interesting account of the Heberdens, the elder of whom was Askew's contemporary. William Heberden (1710-1801) lectured on *Materia Medica* at Cambridge for a number of years before settling in London, and the Gold Headed Cane tells of his celebrated essay on *Mithridatium* and *Theriaca*, published in 1745, which once and for all time disposed of the claims of those two much vaunted antidotes to any value in the treatment of poisons, although at the time he wrote they were still included in the English dispensatory. He was a profound Greek and Latin scholar and furnished out of his own means, which were large, the money necessary to the publication of a number of classical works. He published from a Harleian manuscript in the British Museum, Conyers Middleton's "Appendix to his Dissertations on the servile condition of Physicians among the Ancients," and afforded on the other hand a curious proof of his piety and generosity by paying to the widow of Conyers Middleton the money which she had been offered by a publisher for a manuscript left her by her husband on the "Inefficacy of Prayer," which Heberden judged unedifying, and burnt after purchasing. No less an authority than Samuel Johnson spoke of him as "Ultimus Romanorum, the last of our learned physicians." He was the first to describe the disease *angina pectoris*.

His son, William (1767-1845), was as piously inclined as his father, and also inherited his classical tastes. He likewise achieved great success in his profession. He was appointed physician to George the Third and was in the heyday of fortune when in 1812, his

wife died leaving him a widower with nine children. He retired to a country village in Buckinghamshire and devoted his entire time to the education and care of his children with the sole exception of visits to his royal patient, at such times as his professional assistance was required. He lived thus for fourteen years solacing himself by translating and publishing some of the Greek and Latin classics and writing a little treatise on education. In 1826, he returned to London, largely actuated by the design of aiding one of his sons who had entered upon the study of medicine. Two years later this lad met his death as the result of a wound received while dissecting. The deaths of another son and a daughter led Heberden to devote himself to religion and the study of the scriptures. He subsequently wrote several theological works, as well as a small work on the diseases of children.

From Askew the Gold Headed Cane passed to Dr. William Pitcairn (1711-1791), a brother of Major Pitcairn of the British Army, remembered by all Americans as one of the officers slain at Bunker Hill. Pitcairn had the leading practice of his time in London, but the account of the Cane's career during its possession by him is chiefly interesting because of the other notabilities to whom it introduces us, among them Dr. Richard Warren (1731-1797), and George Edwards (1694-1773) the Librarian of the College of Physicians and one of the most distinguished of English ornithologists. Edwards had for a patron Sir Hans Sloane and the Cane's account of the latter's closing years and the manner in which he secured for the English nation the benefit of his enormous collection, the nucleus of the British Museum, is excellent.

From Dr. William Pitcairn the Cane passed to Dr. David Pitcairn (1749-1809) his nephew. The latter was a Fellow of the Royal Society and to its meetings the Cane frequently accompanied him, being thereby led into a most interesting account of the origin and history of that learned body. Pitcairn was the first to point out the frequency with which valvular heart disease is associated with rheumatism. One of the most prominent of Dr. Pitcairn's contemporaries was Sir George Baker (1722-1809) who also served a number of terms as president of the College of Physicians. Baker was an excellent classical scholar, especially skilled in writing *vers d'esprit* in Latin. The Cane gives his Latin epitaph on a Mrs. Vanbuchtel, the story of whose corpse is a medical classic. The lady died at the age of forty and at her husband's desire Mr. Cruikshank, under the supervision of Dr. Hunter, injected into her arteries spirits of turpentine, coloured by vermilion. Mr. Vanbuchtel kept the body

thus preserved in his house during his life. When he died his son presented it to the College of Surgeons, where it is still to be seen in a mahogany case. Sir George Baker rendered a great service to his native country of Devon by his discovery that the so-called "endemic colic" of Devonshire was really a form of lead poisoning due to the use of lead in the vessels used in the manufacture of Devonshire cider. The disease was entirely eradicated by the use of differently constructed vessels.

From Dr. David Pitcairn the Cane passed into the hands of Dr. Matthew Baillie (1761-1823). Baillie's mother was Dorothea Hunter, sister of William and John Hunter. His sister Joanna won fame as a poetess, receiving high encomiums as a daughter of the Muses, from Sir Walter Scott. Matthew came to London at the age eighteen and lived with his Uncle William Hunter. The latter not only gave him every possible aid in his studies, but at his death bequeathed him his house and collections, with the provision that the latter should ultimately go to the University of Glasgow. William Hunter also left Baillie the family homestead at Long Calderwood. The latter, Baillie most honourably turned over to William Hunter's brother John, to whom it rightfully should have been left, but whom William had deprived of it because of their historic quarrel. In 1795 Baillie published his famous work on morbid anatomy, the first English work on that important subject. It was dedicated to his friend Dr. David Pitcairn, and was notable not only for the extent of the observations which it contained, but also for the excellent illustrations with which it was embellished. "Baillie was considerably below the middle size, with a countenance rather plain than prepossessing, a Scotch dialect, and blunt manners." In spite of his personal disadvantages, he acquired a very large practice and under the pressure of work his natural irritability greatly increased. The Cane tells how "After listening, with torture, to a prosing account from a lady, who ailed so little that she was going to the opera that evening, he had happily escaped from the room, when he was urgently requested to step upstairs again; it was to ask him whether on her return from the opera, she might eat some oysters: 'Yes, Ma'am,' said Baillie, 'shells and all.' "

Baillie possessed the collecting zeal of his uncles, the Hunters. He presented his anatomical preparations, most of which had been made by his own hands, to the College of Physicians in 1819. Four years later he died, his health failing gradually but to such an extent as to cause his retirement from the duties of his profession several years before his death.

With Baillie's death the autobiography of the Gold Headed Cane as compiled by Macmichael ended. When, in 1884, Dr. Munk, the learned chronicler of the College of Physicians of London brought forth the third edition of the little book, he added a number of pages written in the Macmichael style and adding much information to the previously garnered store. Thus he gives us little sketches of Sir Henry Hallford, who had presented the Cane to the College, and under whose auspices the new hall of the College was opened in 1825; Dr. Macmichael, the originator of this unique autobiography; and Drs. John Ayrton Paris and Thomas Mayo, who were respectively presidents of the College in succession to Sir Henry Hallford.

In 1830, Macmichael published "Lives of British Physicians," of which another edition was published by Thomas Legg in 1846. Macmichael himself contributed himself to it the lives of Linacre, Caius, Harvey, Sir Thomas Browne, Sydenham and Radcliffe. The biographies of twelve other English medical worthies were contributed by Dr. Bisset Hawkins, Dr. Parry, Dr. Southey, Dr. Munk, and Mr. Clarke. The book is a small volume containing portraits of some of the more famous subjects. It was dedicated to Sir Henry Hallford. Although not so happy in its conception and execution as the Gold Headed Cane, this little work is a most valuable contribution to English medical literature. The lives are well written, accurate, and contain information much of which is derived from sources inaccessible to the general reader.

If in this hurried review I have been able to awaken interest in Macmichael's charming little medical classic, if, perchance its perusal might stimulate some medical librarian or literary physician to undertake a similar labor in a new direction, how happy would be the result.

